

GEORGI SKREBITSKY

The sly bird

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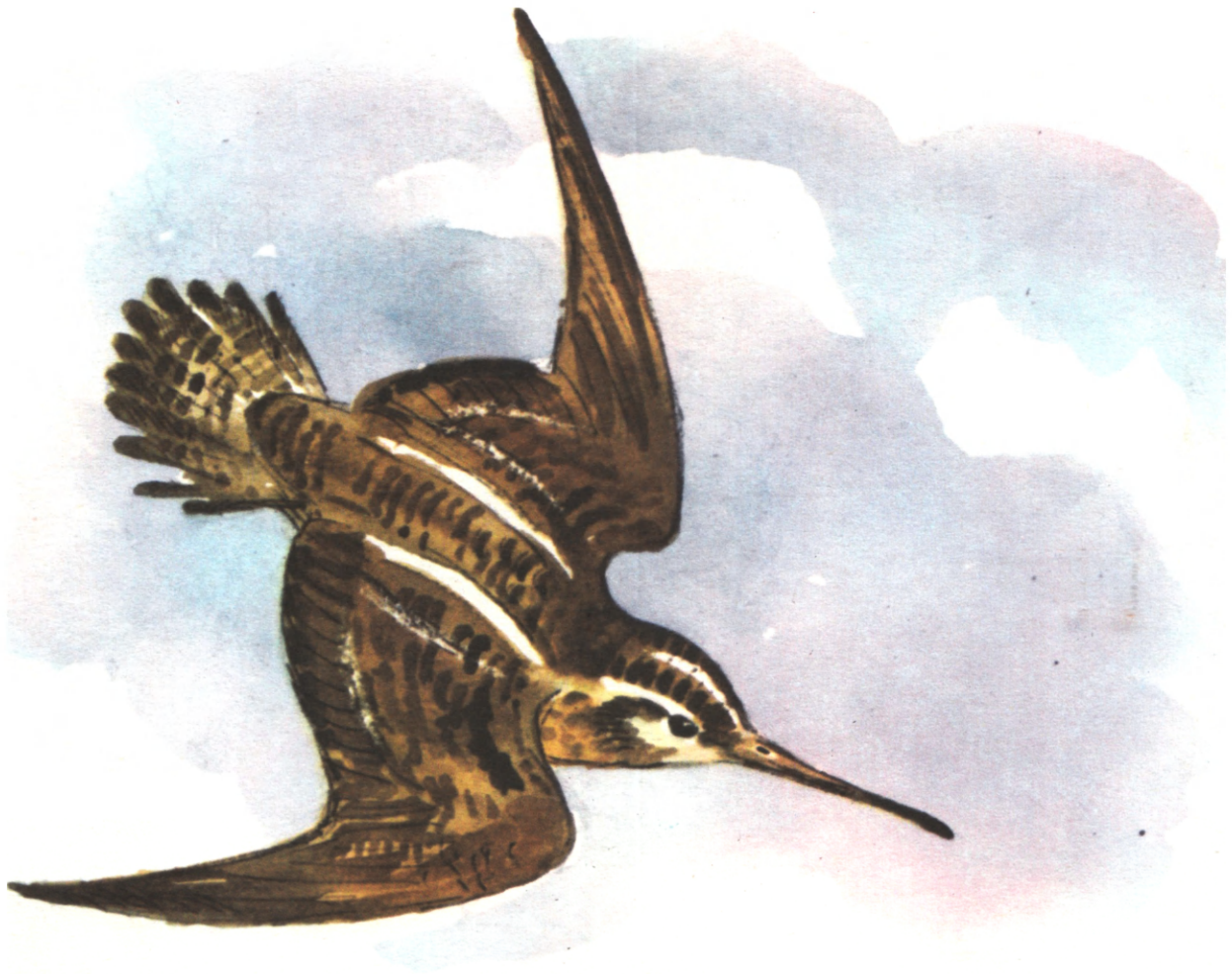
Spring had come. The snow had melted. The migratory birds were returning from the South.

“Oh, home, sweet home! We’re going home!” they cried in all keys as they sped to their native land.

With their arrival the fields and woods came back to life at once. Everywhere birds were singing, chirping, chittering and twittering.

From high up in the sky above a field the skylarks’ notes came like the tinkling of tiny silver bells. Singing away in the woods were chiff-chaffs, chaffinches, nightingales.... It was impossible to name all the birds.

Some of them had no singing voice at all, but not wanting to lag behind the others, they sang away as best they could.



The long-billed snipe soared up over the marshy lowland and then darted down arrow-like. As it headed for the ground, it spread out its tail like a fan. Its tail feathers are stiff and the wind makes them vibrate. It sounds like the plucking of strings. The sound is wonderful: like a lamb bleating in the sky, 'Baa-baa!' That was how the snipe played its spring song on its own tail while it flew through the air.

The parti-coloured woodpecker settled on the very top of a dry and broken fir-tree and started tapping the wood with its bill, 'Trr-rr-rr, trr-rr-rr!' The rapid tattoo carried far into the woods.

That was how different birds were welcoming spring, each in its own way, but all with equal joy.

But while rejoicing at the arrival of spring, the birds never forgot about another—the most important—thing: that the time had come for them to build nests, lay eggs in them and hatch their chicks.

The birds flew to groves, gardens, woods and forests, and each found a suitable place for its nest.

The cuckoos alone gave no thought to building nests. They arrived in our parts rather late: when the buds on the birches had already burst open. But on returning to their native forests, the cuckoos were





in no hurry to start working. From morning till evening they did nothing but play hide-and-seek with one another. One cuckoo would hide in the thicket and call, 'Cu-ckoo, cu-ckoo!', while another would fly about in the forest, trying to find the first.

Busy with their game, they did not notice that spring had nearly ended. It would soon be time to hatch the young and they still had no nests. What were they to do?

The cuckoos took counsel together and decided, 'Why should we build nests at all? Why don't we ask other birds to let us lay our eggs in their nests instead? It should be all the same to them how many eggs they hatch. One egg more, one egg less shouldn't make any difference.'

And so one of the cuckoos flew off to look for other birds' nests. She flew to an old birch and on a thick bough near the trunk she saw something dark, looking like a wood tumour. The cuckoo took a closer look and saw that it was not a tumour at all, but a bird's nest. It was very cleverly built: woven out of thin twigs and last year's dry stalks. And to prevent an enemy from spotting it, various lichens had been woven into its walls—the same lichens that grow on trees. Also woven into its walls were ribbons of birch bark. The nest was well camouflaged and could not be easily spotted.

'Whose home can it be?' the cuckoo wondered, and she flew up to the birch.

"What do you want here?" a chaffinch asked her in a displeased tone, popping its head out of the nest.

"I have to lay an egg," the cuckoo said, "but I have no nest. May I lay it in your nest? You are sitting on your own eggs anyway and will be hatching your chicks, so you could hatch mine together with your own ones."

"I beg your pardon," the chaffinch protested. "I've got lots of eggs in my nest as it is. I can hardly cope with them and you want to add another egg. No. You'd better fly farther into the forest; perhaps, you'll be able to persuade one of the birds to hatch your chicks for you."

There was nothing the cuckoo could do but fly on.

Suddenly she saw a leafy lime-tree in a glade, and on the tip of one branch a woven basket was swaying.



‘What a find!’ the cuckoo rejoiced. ‘So it wasn’t worth my while working to build a nest after all.’ And she was just about to get into the nest.

All of a sudden an oriole’s head popped out of the basket.

“What are you trying to get into my nest for?” the oriole said, angrily.

“But I had no idea it was your nest,” the cuckoo replied. “Don’t be afraid: I’m not going to take it from you. Please let me lay just one egg in it.”

“Never!” said the oriole, indignantly. “You’d better start working to build a nest of your own, then you can lay your eggs in it.”

“No, I somehow don’t feel like building a nest of my own,” said the cuckoo, shaking her head. And she sped away.

She flew about in the forest, looking at every tree and bush closely. Suddenly, on the side of a ravine, she saw a crab apple tree with its branches spread out in all directions. And in the very place, where the branches forked, a bird's nest was showing dark. It was so well, so sturdily built! Its sides were even plastered with clay.

The cuckoo wanted to steal nearer to the nest, but at that moment a thrush came flying to meet her. And as it flew, it chirped and twittered for the whole forest to hear,

“Be off with you! What did you come here for? Don't you see it's my nest?”

The cuckoo wanted to ask the thrush to let her lay an egg in its nest, but the thrush would not even listen to her. It kept on chirping loudly,



“Why don’t you build a nest of your own? Why do you fly, poking your beak into other birds’ nests?”

And so it drove the cuckoo away.

The cuckoo did not know where else to fly and whom else to ask. But she just could not force herself to start building a nest. So she flew farther into the forest and then landed on a dry aspen to rest a while.

Suddenly she noticed a small round hole in the trunk. She looked in and saw a hollow pecked in the trunk and a nest in it. In the nest was a parti-coloured woodpecker, sitting on its eggs.

“How do you do, Woodpecker,” said the cuckoo. “May I lay an egg in your nest?”

“Why don’t you peck a hollow yourself?” asked the woodpecker. “There are many dry trees round here. Shall I show you one?”

“No,” said the cuckoo, peeved. “I can’t peck hollows. Why should I work? I’ll manage somehow to put my eggs in other birds’ nests.”

“Well, then clear off if you’re such a layabout!” the woodpecker said, angrily. “Or else I’ll come out of my hollow and chase you away in the twinkling of an eye!”

But the cuckoo did not wait and quickly dived into the hazel bushes.

On the ground under a bush there was another nest among the dry grass and last year’s fallen leaves. It looked so cosy and neat. And it was made of dry stalks.

In the nest sat a brownish bird. It had flattened itself against the bottom of the nest and it was impossible to see it: it looked like a dark leaf from last year. One could walk by without noticing it. But the sharp-sighted cuckoo immediately spotted the bird hiding in the nest and flew up to it.

“What is your name, please?” she asked.

“My name is Nightingale,” the bird answered. “And what do you want with me?”

“Oh, a mere trifle,” the cuckoo said, airily. “Would you mind flying off the nest for a moment so that I could lay an egg in it? My eggs are small and one egg won’t take up any room in your nest. But you’ll do me a great favour by hatching my chick together with your own ones.”

“Just a moment,” the nightingale said, in surprise. “But why don’t you build a nest of your own and hatch your chicks yourself?”

“You know, I don’t like to bother with such things,” the cuckoo confessed.

“You don’t like taking care of your chicks?” the nightingale said, indignantly. “Then do as you will, but I don’t even want to listen to you!” And it turned away.



‘Where else can I fly and whom else can I ask?’ thought the cuckoo, much taken aback. ‘Evidently, no bird will agree voluntarily to sit on my eggs and hatch my chicks. I’ll have to use a trick.’

So the cuckoo began flying from tree to tree stealthily, hiding behind branches. And as she flew, she searched for a nest from which the owner had flown either to get some food or to stretch its wings. She flew and flew, and at last she came across a deserted nest. It was built in the hollow of an old alder-tree. The cuckoo looked round furtively: the owner of the nest was nowhere to be seen.

‘Well, I mustn’t waste time,’ the trickster decided.

She laid an egg and quickly put it in the nest, where there were already a few eggs.

‘Let her hatch my chick too,’ the cuckoo thought. ‘And now I’ll fly round and look for other nests and lay an egg in each.’

No sooner said than done. The cuckoo chose a suitable time, when the birds were away from their nests, and put an egg in each. Now all was well: her eggs were in other birds’ nests, which meant that those birds would hatch the cuckoo chicks, feed them and protect them from enemies. As for the cuckoo, she would have nothing to worry about; once again she could fly all over the forest and catch hairy caterpillars for breakfast. Almost no other bird will eat those caterpillars. Only the cuckoos are fond of them.

After putting her eggs in other birds’ nests, the cuckoo never gave a thought to what would happen to them afterwards, not even to the first egg, which she had put in the hollow of the old alder-tree.

This is what happened to it.

The owner of the nest—a grey flycatcher—soon returned to the nest to sit on the eggs. Of course, she did not notice that there was an extra egg in her nest, for cuckoo eggs are small, speckled and very similar to the eggs of other small birds.

The grey flycatcher patiently sat in the nest for many days. Finally, blind and naked chicks emerged from the eggs.

At first they could only crawl about in the nest helplessly, but gradually they grew a little stronger, began to raise their heads, opened their beaks wide and cheeped, asking their parents for food.

The last chick came out of its speckled egg a little later than the



rest. It was bigger than the others and an awful fidget: it kept crawling about in the nest, pushing its brothers and sisters.

“Oh, what a mischievous fellow he is!” the mother flycatcher would say to her spouse—the grey flycatcher.

“He’s very smart!” the father flycatcher would reply, nodding his head approvingly. “Mark my words: he’ll be the first to learn to fly and catch midges and mosquitoes. But the other children are also doing fine,” he would add. “See how they raise their heads and open their beaks!”

However, the parents had no time to admire their chicks. Feeding those greedy open beaks was a full-time job.

From morning till night the father and mother flycatchers flew about in the neighbouring groves, catching midges to feed their greedy chicks. Meanwhile something strange was happening in the nest: the number of the chicks in it kept diminishing. But the parents could not count, nor did they know one chick from another. And small wonder: they only had time to fly to the nest and put the midges and mosquitoes into the open beaks. Who knew how many beaks there were?

But what had happened to the chicks? Perhaps, a small predator had started paying visits to the nest? No, that was not it. No predator had climbed into the flycatchers’ nest. This is what was happening. The smart chick—the one that had been the last to hatch—turned out to be extremely naughty. It kept crawling about in the nest, working himself underneath the other chicks. Then, with a great effort, he would lift up a chick and push it over the side of the nest. This was how he had pushed out first one chick, then another, then a third.... The chicks fell into the thick grass on the ground, where the ever-hungry hedgehog immediately found them. The hedgehog would eat whatever food came its way—a frog, a baby mouse or a chick—it made no difference.

Soon the fidget had pushed all his brothers and sisters out of the nest, and remained there alone. But the parents did not even notice that. They would fly to the nest and see the giant chick opening his beak.

“I’m hungry,” he would cheep. “Gimme something to eat!”

The little birds were wearing themselves out, trying to feed their



glutton of a son. And they marvelled, 'Some son we've got! A real giant and no mistake!' There was already scarcely enough room in the nest for him alone and no space for his parents to land on in order to feed their chick. They had to land right on his back. The chick would raise his head and open his beak, as if to say, 'Gimme something to eat. I'm starving!'

A week passed, then another. The giant chick became fully fledged and then he flew up and out of the nest. He landed on a branch and began asking for food again.

The parents gave him food and, as they fed him, they rejoiced, 'See what a fine son we've brought up: three times bigger than ourselves!'

But one day a chaffinch was flying by and landed on a twig to rest a while. And the flycatchers started boasting,

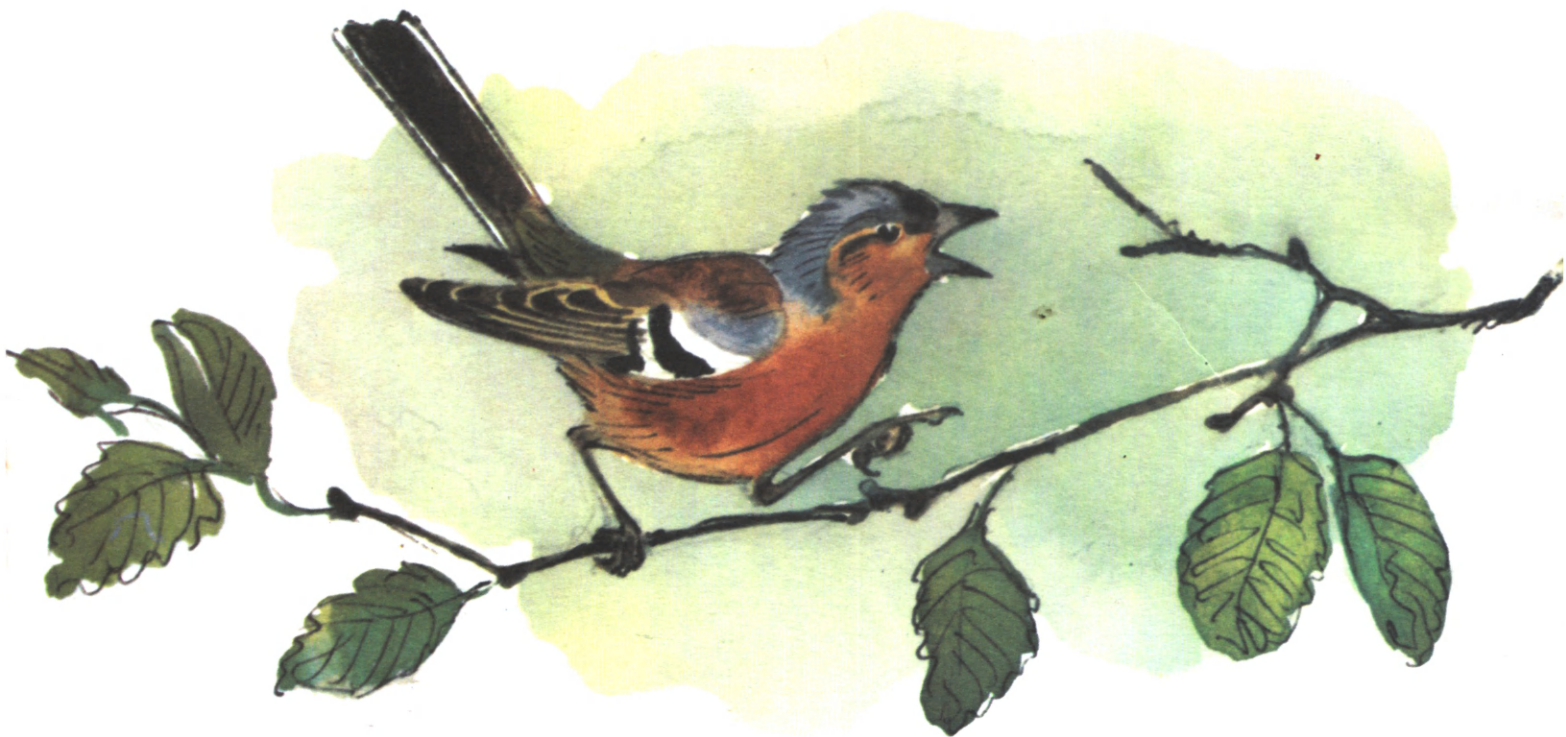
"Look at our chick. Isn't he a fine fellow?"

The chaffinch looked at the fledgling and gasped,

"But it's a baby cuckoo! You haven't been feeding your own chick, but a foundling."

"How do you know?" the flycatchers asked, alarmed.

"I should know: the cuckoo played the same trick on me too, and I fed her baby instead of my own chicks!"





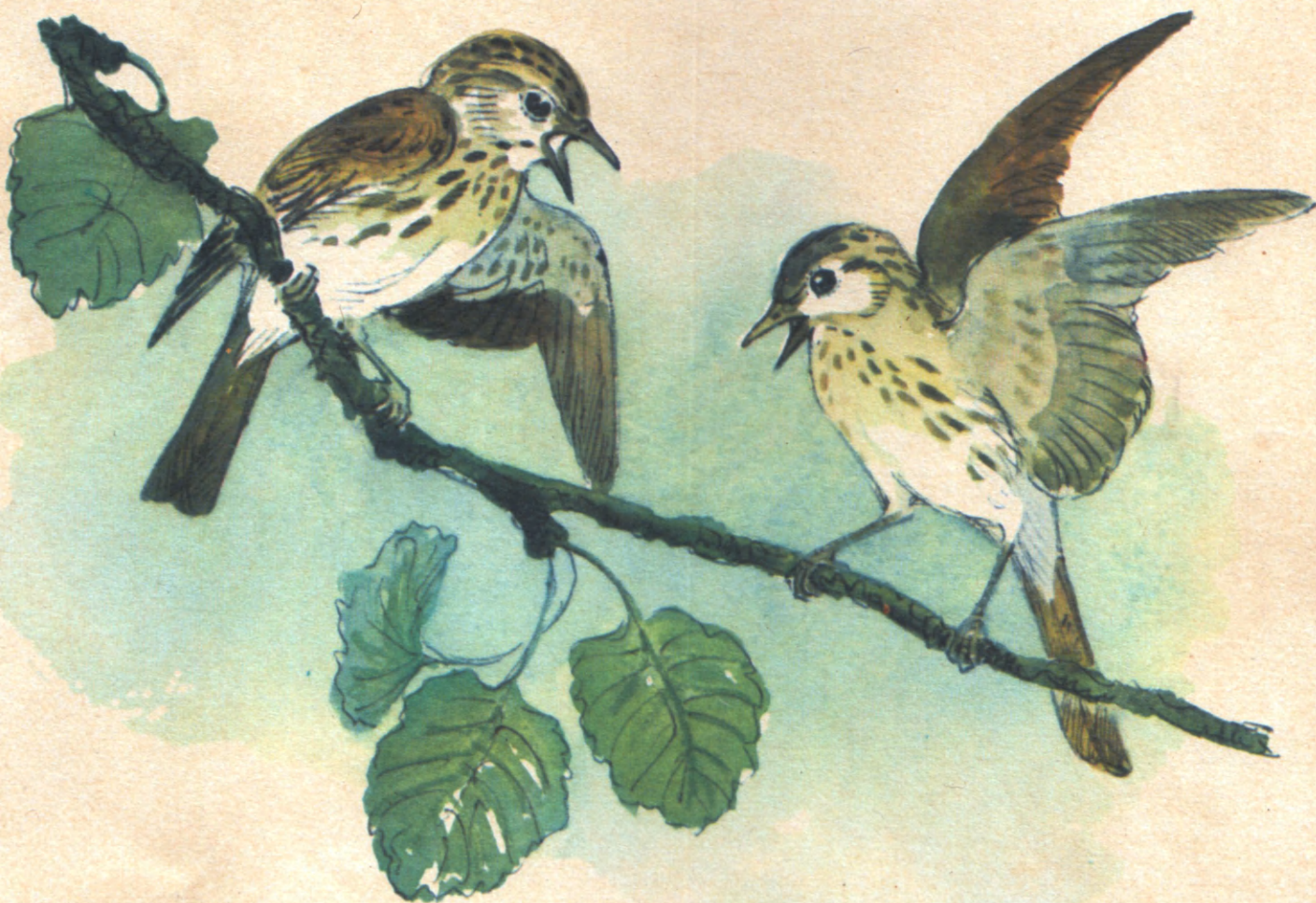
The flycatchers were terribly angry. They rushed to the tree in which their giant chick had perched, but there was no trace of him. He had grown up over the past few days and become stronger. So off he had flown into the forest all by himself to catch those dreadful caterpillars.

Then all the birds gathered together and decided that whenever they saw the cuckoo, they would drive her out of the forest. Only how was that to be done? The cuckoo, as you know, is a sly bird. It will get into the thicket and tease the birds, 'Cu-ckoo, cu-ckoo!'

And the birds simply cannot find her.







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THE SLY BIRD

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